

# Tennessee's Local Archives Program

The State of Tennessee has recently expanded its efforts to help counties and municipalities preserve and make available for research the records of local government. In September 1998, when the “Archives Summit” in Murfreesboro recommended that the state establish a task force to support good record keeping across the state, few could have foreseen that such a goal would soon be a reality. On the heels of that summit, Secretary of State Riley C. Darnell, as the chief records officer for Tennessee, approved the creation of a new department within the State Library & Archives called the Local Archives Program (LAP). The position of Assistant State Archivist was created to direct the program, and two archivists were hired to assist in the day-to-day work of promoting local government records management. The Secretary of State then gave program staff a mandate to support the establishment of local archives around the state through a combination of site visits, technical information, training, and developmental grants. These grants, funded by the Tennessee General Assembly, were intended for the purchase of archival supplies and equipment that directly help to salvage, restore, and preserve the endangered permanent records of a county or municipality.

The Tennessee State Library & Archives, through its Local Archives Program, seeks to provide proper archival care for documents such as the deeds, court minutes, probate and marriage records that are stored in (and outside of) the state’s ninety-five courthouses. Such records are the legal evidence of what government was doing and can tell us a great deal about how citizens interacted with their government. As genealogists and local historians well know, local records are the richest single source of information about our ancestors and the communities in which they lived. The legal instruments, accounts of property and taxes, and litigation proceedings that fill these pages tell us much about the economic transactions, cultural mores, and social relationships that bound Tennesseans together.

The main strategy of the Local Archives Program is to provide training, advice, and seed money at the local level and to persuade interested citizens and government officials to improve their records practices and storage conditions. Until the program was started, county record keepers received little or no training on how to manage and preserve the legal and historical records of the county. As a result, records often were neglected and piled in out-of-the-way nooks and crannies. County offices are overwhelmed with records, and sometimes the easiest solution for offices is simply to move the older records to off-site storage. Dilapidated schoolrooms, jails, gymnasiums, courthouse basements, attics, and closets are filled with some of the oldest and most historically significant records. Old records housed in such conditions are subject to the damaging effects of water, extremes in temperature, and exposure to pests and the elements. Fortunately, such neglect and poor conditions are becoming the exception rather than the rule in Tennessee.

The basic goals of the Local Archives Program are as follows:

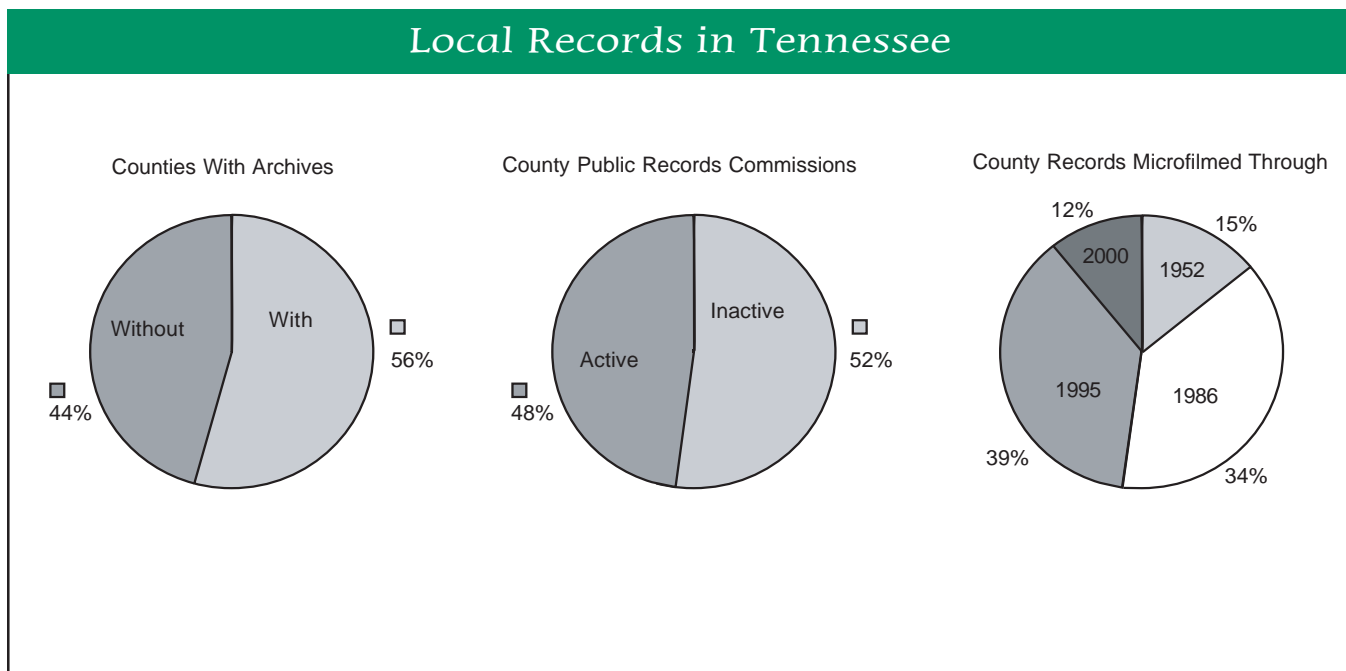
**1. Establish a functioning public records commission in every county in Tennessee.** At the time of the Archives Summit, only forty-one of Tennessee’s ninety-five counties had a Public Records Commission. Of

these, perhaps only half were active (meaning that they met at least twice a year to authorize actual records disposals). As of 2004, there are forty-six active Public Records Commissions.

**2. Establish an archive facility in every county in Tennessee.** At the time of the Archives Summit, there were twenty county archives and three known municipal archives. As of February 2004, there are fifty-three county archives and five municipal archives in the state. The level of sophistication of these archival facilities varies considerably. Some are free-standing buildings, while others are rooms designated within the county courthouse. The newest trend is to couple the archives with the county library by either building an annex or using existing library space. Several counties have recently installed archives under the auspices of the library. Regardless of particular arrangements, the ultimate goal is to have each archives be an integral part of county government—with a paid staff responsible to the county mayor or the county Public Records Commission.

**3. Each county should have a basic records management program.** Good records management is essential to a successful archives program. Most counties that have neglected their records have also intermingled temporary and permanent records. Until outdated temporary records are weeded out and disposed of, there is little hope of organizing the valuable permanent records. Care of the older, historical records of the county always takes a back seat to management of the current records of an office, and county officials are more likely to support an archives program if their immediate concerns about congested space are addressed. Good records management, along with an archives program, can actually save the county money in the long-term.

**4. Provide consultant services and training in records preservation and processing to local government officials, staff and volunteers.** In many cases, enthusiasm to start an archival program exists, but those involved lack the training and experience to carry through a successful program. Local Archives Program staff can provide on-site training in the form of workshops and seminars to give volunteers the basics of archival processing and conservation. Instructors certify local records personnel and serve as consultants to local governments who wish to set up an archive by helping with the design or providing information on proper storage conditions.



With the assistance of federal grant money provided by the National Historic Publications and Records Commission, the Local Archives Program has been able to conduct numerous workshops and site visits to assist counties to create professional-level archives. The workshops help record keepers understand the fundamentals of archival processing, conservation techniques, public service, and archival administration. The Local Archives Program staff makes frequent site visits throughout the state to monitor the progress and developments in each archive. On-site visits lend much-needed political support to local efforts and help counties determine the best means of improving their archival facility. To date, Local Archives Program staff members have visited eighty-two of the state's ninety-five counties, some repeatedly.

The Tennessee Archives Institute began in 2000 as an annual training program on local archives and records management, co-sponsored by the Tennessee State Library and Archives and the University of Tennessee's County Technical Assistance Service. Offered each year as part of a three-year cycle, the Institute is designed to be a two and one-half day introduction to key management issues for local government records personnel, helping them to hone their skills and allowing them to network with fellow archivists. The Institute annually offers a different course of instruction on topics ranging from archival processing of loose court records to records management, space planning and design, staffing and volunteers, marketing and fund-raising, and providing reference service. The low cost for participants to attend the Institute is crucial to its success since many of the participants are volunteers who receive little or no compensation from the county for their archival work. To date, sixty-eight participants representing forty-three counties have attended the Tennessee Archives Institute. Fourteen people have completed the three-year cycle of instruction and received certification as Archives Managers.



*Shelby County records storage*

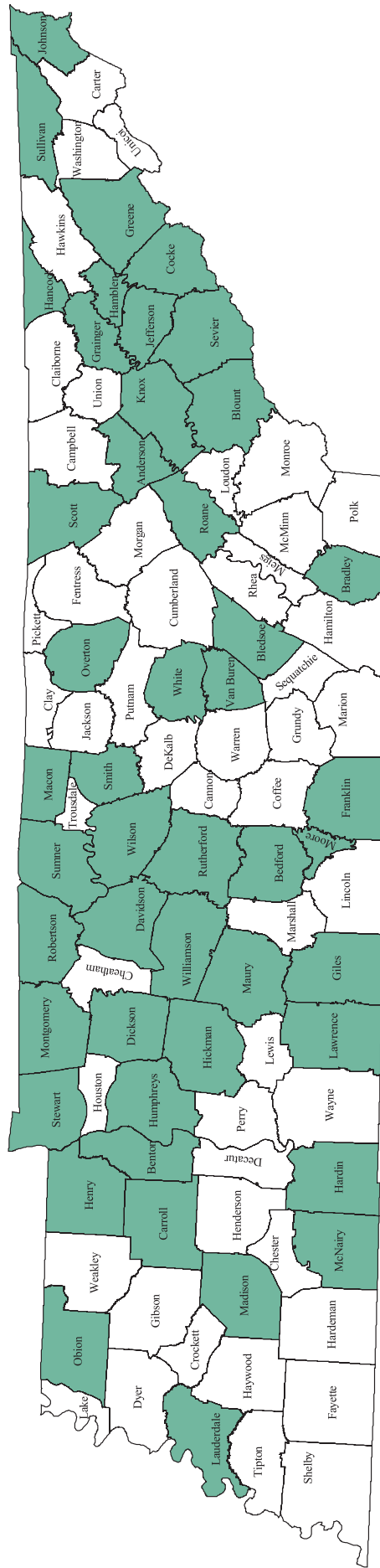


The Local Archives Program also administers the Local Archives Development Grants. Funded by the Tennessee General Assembly, the grants provide money (to be shared among qualified counties and municipalities) for the purchase of shelving, archival supplies, and equipment that directly salvage, restore, and house endangered records of the county/municipality. Beginning in fiscal year 1999, an average of \$50,000 per year has been made available, which is then allocated as direct improvement grants to local government archives. Between 1999 and 2004 (with the exception of FY 2001-2002, when no grants were made due to state budget constraints), eighty-four individual grants have been made, ranging from \$500 to a maximum of \$5000. The relatively small amount of funding is most effectively used to get records off the floor and on to metal shelves, out of acidic containers, cleaned and flattened, and organized under effective control so that the records are accessible when someone wishes to examine them. Over the four years that the LAP has awarded grant funds, a total of \$238,300 has been distributed to forty-five different counties and one municipality.

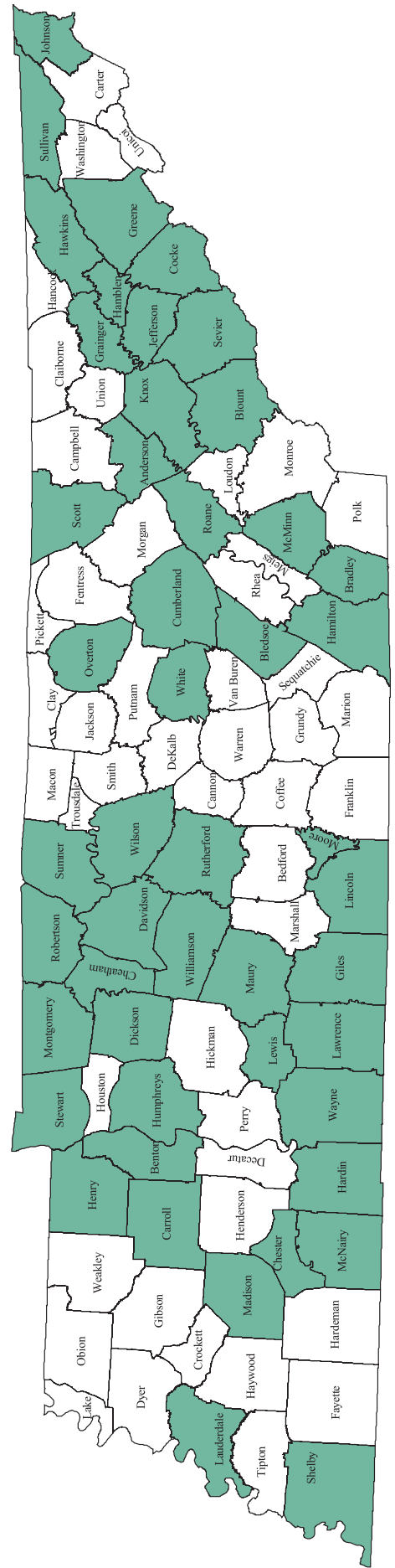
To be eligible for a Local Archives Development Grant, a county must show that it has an active public records commission that meets at least twice a year as required by law. A county or municipality must demonstrate a clear budgetary commitment to establish and sustain a formal archives or records office supervised by a county-appointed archivist or records officer. The grants are designed to help local governments with their own efforts to build effective archives, not as a substitute for local resources. To attract state support, a local government must make a good-faith effort to develop an archive out of its own resources and continue funding in the future. Commitment to the preservation of and public access to its records is often the determining factor in whether an application is funded or rejected.

Though state involvement in records preservation is not the only driving force behind the rapid growth in the number of local archives, the fact that a majority of Tennessee counties now have some sort of archives is probably due to a combination of local interest and commitment and state support. Establishing an archive is not usually an expensive proposition, and a small grant (along with a reminder that there are public records laws to be complied with) can sometimes start the process going. The interest of the state in nurturing this development, as embodied in the Secretary of State's Local Archives Program, can be the catalyst that helps persuade a reluctant county mayor and legislative body to invest in a progressive records program. Much work remains to be done to realize the goals of the Local Archives Program. A good start has been made, however, and a network of local government archives is slowly but surely emerging in Tennessee.

## Counties Receiving Local Archives Development Grants, 1999–2004



## Counties With Active Public Records Commissions



A map of Kentucky showing its 120 counties. The counties are labeled with their names. The map is oriented with the state's outline. The following list represents the counties shown on the map, ordered from north to south and west to east within each row:

- Johnson, Sullivan, Washington, Carter
- Hancock, Hawkins, Greene, Cocke
- Clayborne, Grainger, Harlan, Jefferson, Sevier
- Union, Knox, Blount
- Campbell, Anderson, Loudon, Monroe
- Scott, Morgan, Roane, McMinn, Polk
- Pickett, Fentress, Cumberland, Rhea, Bradley
- Overton, Van Buren, Bledsoe, Hamilton
- Clay, Jackson, Putnam, White, Sevier, McMinn, Polk
- DeKalb, Warren, Cannon, Coffee, Franklin
- Macon, Trousdale, Smith, Wilson, Rutherford, Bedford, Lincoln
- Summer, Davidson, Williamson, Maury, Marshall, Giles
- Robertson, Cheatham, Dickson, Hickman, Lewis, Lawrence
- Montgomery, Stewart, Houston, Humphreys, Perry, Wayne
- Henry, Benton, Carroll, Henderson, Deatur, Hardin
- Weakley, Gibson, Madison, Chester, McNairy
- Obion, Dyer, Crockett, Haywood, Hardeman
- Lauderdale, Fayette
- Tipton, Shelby

A map of Georgia showing its 159 counties. Each county is labeled with its name. The counties are color-coded according to the legend:

- Blue:** Adams, Appling, Baldwin, Burke, Calhoun, Chatham, Clinch, Colquhoun, Coweta, Cuthbert, DeKalb, Douglas, Evans, Fayette, Forsyth, Fulton, Gilmer, Haralson, Heard, Henry, Houston, Jasper, Jones, Keith, Lanier, Lincoln, Long, Lowndes, McIntosh, Meriwether, Miller, Mitchell, Monroe, Montgomery, Morgan, Murray, Newton, Oconee, Oglethorpe, Paulding, Peach, Pickens, Polk, Pulaski, Quitman, Randolph, Richmond, Rockdale, Spalding, Spaulding, Stewart, Sumter, Talbot, Tatnell, Terrell, Thomas, Tift, Turner, Twiggs, Upson, Walker, Walton, Ware, Wilcox, Yamacraw.
- Green:** Albany, Anderson, Appling, Baldwin, Bibb, Blount, Brantley, Butts, Calhoun, Camden, Charlton, Chatham, Clinch, Clay, Cobb, Colquhoun, Coweta, Cuthbert, DeKalb, Dodge, Douglas, Evans, Fayette, Forsyth, Fulton, Gilmer, Haralson, Heard, Henry, Houston, Jasper, Jones, Keith, Lanier, Lincoln, Long, Lowndes, McIntosh, Meriwether, Miller, Mitchell, Monroe, Montgomery, Morgan, Murray, Newton, Oconee, Oglethorpe, Paulding, Peach, Pickens, Polk, Pulaski, Quitman, Randolph, Richmond, Rockdale, Spalding, Spaulding, Stewart, Sumter, Talbot, Tatnell, Terrell, Thomas, Tift, Turner, Twiggs, Upson, Walker, Walton, Ware, Wilcox, Yamacraw.
- Orange:** Adams, Appling, Baldwin, Burke, Calhoun, Chatham, Clinch, Colquhoun, Coweta, Cuthbert, DeKalb, Douglas, Evans, Fayette, Forsyth, Fulton, Gilmer, Haralson, Heard, Henry, Houston, Jasper, Jones, Keith, Lanier, Lincoln, Long, Lowndes, McIntosh, Meriwether, Miller, Mitchell, Monroe, Montgomery, Morgan, Murray, Newton, Oconee, Oglethorpe, Paulding, Peach, Pickens, Polk, Pulaski, Quitman, Randolph, Richmond, Rockdale, Spalding, Spaulding, Stewart, Sumter, Talbot, Tatnell, Terrell, Thomas, Tift, Turner, Twiggs, Upson, Walker, Walton, Ware, Wilcox, Yamacraw.
- Red:** Adams, Appling, Baldwin, Burke, Calhoun, Chatham, Clinch, Colquhoun, Coweta, Cuthbert, DeKalb, Douglas, Evans, Fayette, Forsyth, Fulton, Gilmer, Haralson, Heard, Henry, Houston, Jasper, Jones, Keith, Lanier, Lincoln, Long, Lowndes, McIntosh, Meriwether, Miller, Mitchell, Monroe, Montgomery, Morgan, Murray, Newton, Oconee, Oglethorpe, Paulding, Peach, Pickens, Polk, Pulaski, Quitman, Randolph, Richmond, Rockdale, Spalding, Spaulding, Stewart, Sumter, Talbot, Tatnell, Terrell, Thomas, Tift, Turner, Twiggs, Upson, Walker, Walton, Ware, Wilcox, Yamacraw.
- Yellow:** Adams, Appling, Baldwin, Burke, Calhoun, Chatham, Clinch, Colquhoun, Coweta, Cuthbert, DeKalb, Douglas, Evans, Fayette, Forsyth, Fulton, Gilmer, Haralson, Heard, Henry, Houston, Jasper, Jones, Keith, Lanier, Lincoln, Long, Lowndes, McIntosh, Meriwether, Miller, Mitchell, Monroe, Montgomery, Morgan, Murray, Newton, Oconee, Oglethorpe, Paulding, Peach, Pickens, Polk, Pulaski, Quitman, Randolph, Richmond, Rockdale, Spalding, Spaulding, Stewart, Sumter, Talbot, Tatnell, Terrell, Thomas, Tift, Turner, Twiggs, Upson, Walker, Walton, Ware, Wilcox, Yamacraw.